

SAFETY PERSPECTIVES THE ADVOCATE

What makes an activist tick? Here's the story of one determined woman.

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Drive down Mary Lamielle's shady, sleepy street in Vorhees Township, New Jersey, and what you see is a typical suburban neighborhood. But pull up in front of her house and you're likely to hear the phone ringing. It rings off the hook, 20 to 30 times a day.

Calls come from the EPA. Capitol Hill. University researchers. Reporters. And from people complaining about pounding headaches, burning lungs, and how employers and doctors just don't understand their predicament.

You've arrived at the doorstep of the National Center for Environmental Health Strategies. It's the command post from where Lamielle wages her battle on behalf of the victims of multiple chemical sensitivity. For eight years now she's been working from her cluttered home office, building her organization, drafting Congressional testimony, taking on high-powered corporate officials.

Lamielle calls herself an advocate for public health. The safety and health field is filled with advocates, activists, call them what you will. Many safety and health professionals in industry can't understand what makes these people tick. To get an idea what drives them on, *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News* visited with Mary Lamielle one hot summer's day.

Mysterious bouts

Lamielle says her path to grass-roots leadership was a natural outgrowth of her own duel with environmental pollutants. In 1979, bouts with mysterious chronic illness sent her health on a downward spiral. She lost her job. And, on days when her reactions were most severe or environmental pollutants strongest, she was restricted to a wheelchair and depended on an oxygen tank to breathe outdoors.

During her first year of sickness, Lamielle heard that neighboring families blamed emissions from a nearby sew-

age treatment facility for their own poor health. But it was several more years before an occupational physician concluded that air pollutants from the sewage plant, compounded by off-gassing from a major home renovation project, triggered her chemical sensitivity.

It also triggered her activism.

Since 1986, Lamielle has dedicated all her time and energy to the issue of multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS). She stockpiles and publicizes information on pesticides, indoor air quality, and disability rights. She has testified before Congress. To labor unions and employers who want help accommodating MCS workers, she is a freelance consultant. She reviews environmental health policies proposed by state agencies, and coordinates the 2,500-member national center.

There is no salary involved. In fact, her husband estimates they've spent \$10,000 of their own on the center.

There is also little glamour. Even when she travels to national conferences she struggles constantly to avoid a chemical reaction — in the hotel room, in the conference hall, in restaurants, and walking on the sidewalk.

Still, Lamielle loves her work. Why? Call it the activist's self confidence — she's sure that she's doing the right thing. She also sees herself as having an impact.

Lamielle took credit in 1990 when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development said MCS accommodations are Fair Housing Act-protected rights. She also celebrated a victory in 1989 when EPA's Report to Congress on Indoor Air Quality mandated MCS research. Last year Congress appropriated \$250,000 for the research, to be coordinated with her center.

Studies are needed to gain a better understanding of MCS, and help determine whether it is an environmental illness or "epidemic of nonsense," as some in the medical community contend. Lamielle has taken on naysayers from the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, the Chemical Manufacturers Association, and other medical professional and industry groups.

She's an unlikely match for them. Soft looking, with a youngish face framed in bouncy brown curls and shaded eyeglasses, this unassuming woman is not the type you'd expect to see going head to head with a corporate medical director or association president.

But Lamielle is fast talking and fearless. She says, "In the eight years I've been involved with this I could have gone through medical school and then some. Someone has to stand up to the medical profession and tell them to take another look."

Solving problems

Lamielle is so good at getting people to take another look that her talent is in demand. People having trouble at work or at home often ask Lamielle to intervene.

At a New York Public Library branch, Lamielle stepped in for a group who said cleaning products made them sick. She sat down with workers and helped them narrow down what they could tolerate. Then she helped them poll other building occupants to reach consensus.

In Florida, Lamielle negotiated with a condominium association for an elderly woman with MCS. Toxic renovation materials to be used on her condo would have made the woman sick. When Lamielle got a groundskeeper to admit he suffered similar effects, the association president agreed to some of her requests.

Lamielle enjoys solving problems. She prides herself on being analytical and methodical. "People who haven't lived with (multiple chemical sensitivity) think this disease is chaos. They think patients have every symptom and react to anything. It's not like that," she explains. Figuring out exactly what causes reactions is like putting together a puzzle, she says.

Her views have been sought out by some government officials. In fact, when the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registries' expert panel met in Annapolis earlier this year, the state delayed pesticide spraying two weeks so Lamielle could attend.

What's next for Lamielle? She wants to see more people with chemical sensitivities accommodated at work under the Americans with Disabilities Act. She's also pushing for indoor air quality legislation. Lamielle has no plans to slow down. She doesn't know who else would be pushing if she wasn't.

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